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SUBJECT: ABU MAZEN CALLS FOR ACTIVE EU ROLE IN PEACE PROCESS

1. Summary: On a two-day official visit to Italy, Abu Mazen underlined PA commitment to the Roadmap and called for a vigorous EU role in the peace process. He said Palestinians had chosen the path of democracy and called on Israel to remove all obstacles to the conduct of elections, including in Jerusalem. Italian leaders reiterated their support for the peace process and Prime Minister Berlusconi renewed his offer to host Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at Erice, a picturesque Sicilian seaside town. End summary.

2. During his December 2-3 visit to Rome, PA President Mahmoud Abbas reiterated to his Italian interlocutors that he and the PA consider political negotiations with Israel to be the only way to reach a peace. He underscored the PA's total commitment to follow the Roadmap and invited the EU to take a more active role in the peace process and become a third party to it. "We want the EU to have a political role, along with its economic role. Fortunately this role, which for us is very important, has already started. The agreement on the Rafah Crossing was reached also with the EU's commitment." (Note: Italian Carabinieri General Pietro Pistolese is heading the EU's Rafah mission. End note.)

3. Abbas said he was determined to extend PA control over the entire Palestinian territory and guarantee public order, which he called an absolute priority. He said he was equally determined to move forward with democratic reform, because "rebuilding trust is the main path toward peace in the Middle East." On several occasions, he pointed to what he termed the major effort he and Israeli PM Ariel Sharon were putting into the peace process, remarking that the motivations driving both were sincere. He said a lot can be done toward achieving peace if the people of Israel follow their leader.

4. Abbas used his public remarks in Rome to underscore that the PA had chosen the path of democracy -- a democracy in which all must participate. He did not publicly mention Hamas (nor did any of his Italian interlocutors). The PA President stressed that Palestinians residing in Jerusalem must be allowed to vote. Calling on Israel to remove all obstacles to the conduct of elections, he warned that if the PA failed to conduct the elections successfully, Israel would have responsibility for blocking the Palestinian democratic process.

5. Abbas was well received by all his Italian interlocutors. Both President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi and PM Silvio Berlusconi gave assurances of Italy's continued support of the Palestinian goal of an independent state living in peace with Israel, within secure, certain, and recognized boundaries. Berlusconi once again proposed the southern Italian city of Erice as a venue for a possible international peace conference or for Israeli-Palestinian talks (Abbas accepted). And Ciampi and Berlusconi underscored the importance of the Roadmap to peace. On Jerusalem, Ciampi called for a solution that would not jeopardize its status as a "city dear to all cultures and religions." Abbas remarked that it should remain "open to all the faithful" and that its administration should answer to the "fundamental needs of the Jewish and Palestinian people."

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